

WINE

ENTHUSIAST

M A G A Z I N E

CABERNET HITS THE HIGH NOTES

by JOE CZERWINSKI

In an era when low yields are regularly billed as a prerequisite to producing top wines, California's biggest vintage ever has produced scores of superb Cabernets.

"It was one of those even, good-weather vintages, the kind we haven't had lately," laughs Lyndsey Harrison, owner/winemaker of Harrison Winery and Vineyards, recalling 1997. "We got great quality and great quantity, which you hardly ever see." Nancy Andrus of Pine Ridge Winery calls it "an absolutely fabulous vintage."

Iron Horse winemaker and partner Forrest Tancer agrees. "It was the earliest bud break in the last 20 years. We got good fruit set and ended up with a good crop of very good quality. It was really a seamless vine-to-wine experience." All of these producers crafted wines we rated 94 points or higher.

Of course, these blissful recollections and wonderful successes don't mean that all parts of California made great Cabernet. Our recent tastings of 171 California Cabernet Sauvignons and blends retailing for \$30 or more show that there is a reason for Napa's preeminence. Of the 85 wines in the tasting we rated 91 or higher, 70 (just over 80 percent) were from Napa and its subappellations.

"I don't understand why other places aren't having the same sort of success with Cab," says Dirk Hampson, director of winemaking for Far Niente and Nickel & Nickel, which placed a bevy of wines in the 90-plus point range. "Certainly you can find similar climates and similar soils in other parts of California, but Napa has a special sort of synergy between soil, temperature and the attention Cabernet has received."

Andrus attributes much of the valley's success to its proximity to San Pablo Bay. "In Stag's Leap, we almost always have cool morning fogs,

All over California in 1997, it is a recurring theme. Because of the warm sunny weather, winemakers allowed the vines to carry more fruit than in cooler vintages like '98 and '99. As a result, quantities for many wines are up in 1997. In most markets, greater supply would mean falling prices, but not in California. It's a reflection of good economic times and the quality of the wines.

"California winemakers are making Cabernets that are every bit as good as the Bordelais, and should be paid accordingly," asserts an unapologetic Harrison. "Where that's going, I don't know; it's the economy, I guess." Lockwood's Pessagno says consumers should be selective. "Some really are that good," he says, referring to wines that sell for \$75 to \$100 or more per bottle. "Others are just capitalizing on the wave."

Andrus agrees that the economy seems to be the big thing driving prices these days. "We kept our prices in check for a long time and now with this economy we're being paid back for it." Shelton sees "tremendous demand. Scarcity and shortage are playing a role."

"Sure, there's a bit of keeping up with the Joneses," says Hampson, not referring to the high-flying Jones Family 1997 Napa Valley Cabernet (95 points). "If you don't maintain your standing, you're left behind. Still, as long as we deliver on the promise of a special-occasion wine, I think our prices are reasonable."

Hampson is right. At an average price of more than \$50 per bottle, these are not "daily drinkers" for most of us; rather, they are bottles that will be consumed at restaurants or on special occasions, or cellared by collectors until they reach their full potential.

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93 Nickel & Nickel 1997 Stelling Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville); \$95. Very polished, with rich blackberry, chocolate, tea and cedar aromas. Full cocoa and black-cherry and cola accents add to the flavor of sour plums on the graceful palate. The texture is suave and luxurious. Closes with dusty, soft, even tannins and some cocoa notes. Has good depth and claret-like poise. Very approachable now; drink to 2010.

92 Nickel & Nickel 1997 Carpenter Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$75. An offshoot label of Far Niente. This is one of four new Nickel & Nickel single-vineyard Cabernets. It's tight and brawny, with earth and black plum, but also some sulfur that goes away after breathing and swirling. Concentrated black fruit is supported by espresso notes and chocolate. Finishes full and dry, with evenly spread tannins.

92 Nickel & Nickel 1997 John C. Sullenger Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville); \$65. Another in the new N&N line, the Sullenger features red and black fruit, herbs, some earth, and an appealing whiff of sautéed pancetta or bacon. Commendable richness in support of black-plum flavor and coffee notes. Its poundcake-like density urges cellaring.

90 Nickel & Nickel 1997 Rock Cairn Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville); \$75. Deep, pungent dark-berry aromas open this round, inviting cherry and raspberry flavored wine. Round and almost overly suave on the palate, it has ample black cherry, chocolate and toast flavors, and closes with a finish sporting dried fruits. The dry, talcum-like tannins allow for early drinking.